Atma-vichAra - Self-enquiry in daily life

Why Atma-vichAra

Before discussing Atma-vichAra i.e. Self-enquiry in daily life, it is important to understand why I want to practise Atma-vichAra in daily life. Why at all am I motivated in this direction! Is it for some reward, is it for some novel experience, is it for some extraordinary state mentioned in our ShAstra? What is it that drives me in the direction of Atma-vichAra? Is it fear of missing out on things which the revered sages of yore achieved? Is it also basically my greed due to which I am motivated to do Atma-vichAra?

If we analyse our life carefully, we find that there is constant fear. A fear which is running through in all activities. There is fear in our workplace, there is fear in home, there is fear on the outside, there is fear everywhere. Let us see some examples:

- Nothing untoward should happen which will ruin my name and fame.
- Nothing untoward should happen to my children and family members.
- My wealth should not be lost, otherwise there will be immense loss.
- My character should not be lost. My health should not go down.
- My reputation should remain intact.

All these fears are based on desires. The desires are not only negative in nature, but also positive. For example:

- May my wealth increase.
- May my children do very well in life. They should be healthy, wealthy and command respect.
- May I get MOksha.
- May my antah-karaNa be immensely pure.

If we observe our life carefully, we find that right from the start of the day till the end, we are pursuing and acting in response to these two prompts of desire and fear.

- We wake up early in the morning for meditation, in pursuance of desire for purity of mind and knowledge.
- We go for a walk in pursuit of a desire for a healthy body and out of fear that I should not be sick.
- While eating, one would eat the food of his desire and may not necessarily eat healthy food. This is because of the command of sense-of-taste.
- We study with a desire to gain knowledge and to remove the fear that I would be an ignorant fool if I don't study.
- Day-long there is constant fear in the background of some unpleasant event.

When we observe each and our activity with a sensitive mind, we find that we are under tremendous bondage. That we are really not our masters. We are rather slaves to our desires and fears. These desires and fears are controlling us and we meekly act in pursuance of them. Some desires appear good, while some appear bad. One may renounce eating junk food. But that is merely a replacement of a "bad desire to eat junk food with a "good" desire of being healthy. But the fact of being controlled by desires remains intact. Similarly, some fears save our lives. We may not jump from a multi-storey building because of fear of death. This fear saves our lives. Further, some fears lead to stress and diseases. In either case, fears govern us like a master governs his servant.

We thus realize that desires and fears are hindering my freedom at each moment of time. And fear being rooted in desire, it is the desire which literally has chained me.

This desire is the bondage due to which I am unable to sit peacefully for a moment. In constant action, I always keep on doing something. Even my non-doing, in pursuance of a desire, becomes doing. This constant-doing is tremendous stress. This is bondage.

Suffocated, one asks, how to get rid of this bondage. Can this even happen? Can I ever lead a desire-free life? I cannot breathe free with desires subsisting. Can I live without this bondage, can I live without any desire of any sort, without any fear of any sort?

Here starts genuine spirituality wherein I have appreciated my bondage, and I truly want to get rid of it. Spirituality does not begin with an intellectual curiosity, it does not begin with a "desire" for an exotic state "MOksha". Spirituality starts when I desperately want to get rid of my bondage. And that bondage is desire and fear.

Cause of bondage

In order to solve a problem, one needs to analyse it. In order to get rid of bondage, we need to understand what bondage is. At this point of time, VedAnta comes as an academic discipline and uses an anumAna to teach that bondage is illusory. It uses the hetu of drishyatva to prove that whatever is seen is illusory. विमतं मिथ्या, दृश्यत्वात्, रज्जुसर्पवत्, शुक्तिरूप्यवत्, स्वप्नदृश्यवच्च. Since bondage is also a seen, i.e. desires, fears are also seen, they are illusory.

Further, anything which is illusory is by definition a product of ignorance. Now, there is no means to permanently eradicate an effect without eradicating its cause. Thus, we understand that for removing bondage, we need to remove ignorance.

Now, there are only two entities in the world - seer and seen. Since seen is a product of ignorance, naturally the locus and object of ignorance can only be the seer. Further, the seer-hood of seer is also a seen. Hence, seer without seer-hood is the entity about which there is ignorance.

So, we see that to get rid of my bondage in the form of fears and desires, I need to remove the ignorance. Further, this ignorance is about the seer without seer-hood. Hence, the knowledge of seer-without-seerhood will result in eradication of ignorance and consequently my bondage.

The knowledge of seer-without-seerhood arises from mahAvAkyAs. These are four in number. अहं ब्रह्मास्मि, तत्त्वमसि, प्रज्ञानं ब्रह्म, अयमात्मा ब्रह्म.

Scheme of advaita vedAnta

We can very easily, with a little bit of guidance from ShAstra and Guru, appreciate that there are two entities in the world. One is AtmA and second is anAtmA. Anything which is indicated by using the word "this" is anAtmA. The entity which is indicated by using the word "I" is called AtmA. There is no confusion in so far as all objects external to the body are concerned. Naturally, we address them as "this". And hence, we never refer to a table, chair, or door as "aham". We always refer to them as "this table, this chair, this door". Similarly, for indicating my Self, I never use the word "this". So, there is no confusion with respect to my Self either. However, with respect to body and mind, there is a confusion. Sometimes, I use the word "aham" for body-mind, and sometimes "this". The bondage in the form of desires and fears is rooted in taking body-mind as AtmA.

Naishkarmya Siddhi says -

अनात्मत्वं स्वतस्सिद्धं देहाद्भिन्नस्य वस्तुनः । ज्ञातुरप्यात्मता तद्वन्मध्ये संशयदर्शनम् ॥ ४.४ ॥

इदमित्येव बाह्येऽर्थे ह्यहमित्येव बोद्धरि । द्वयं दृष्टं यतो देहे तेनायं मुह्यते जनः ॥ ४.६ ॥

The first step, according to advaita, is to do Atma-anAtma-viveka. To clearly discriminate between AtmA and anAtmA. Understanding the extraordinary dharma of AtmA and anAtmA, one needs to clearly understand that AtmA is seer and anAtmA is seen. That AtmA is chetana whereas anAtmA is jaDa.

After doing this Atma-anAtma-viveka, one appreciates a crucial problem of human existence - despite fully knowing that AtmA and anAtmA are distinct like chalk and cheese, one confuses AtmA for anAtmA, the dharma of AtmA for dharma of anAtmA and vice versa. This is called adhyAsa.

This adhyAsa also is a seen and hence can be removed only by removal of ignorance which has seer without seer-hood as the object.

The ignorance can never be removed by Atma-anAtma-viveka because the vishaya of Atma-anAtma-viveka-jnAna is “Atma-anAtma-bheda” and not Atma-swarUpa which is Brahma-Atm-aikya. Further, Atma-anAtma-bheda is also a product of ignorance. How can it ever remove ignorance? So, Naiskarmya SIddhi says:

संसारबीजसंस्थोऽयं तद्भिया मुक्तिमिच्छ्हति। शशो निमीलनेनेव मृत्युं परिजिहीर्षति॥ ४.१६॥

The second step of advaita vedAnta is to attain the knowledge of seer-without-seerhood. That is AtmA without a tinge of anAtmA. We need to know what its swarUpa is. That swarUpa is covered by ignorance and hence knowing that will certainly remove the ignorance. That knowledge is to be attained from MahAvAkyAs which explain that swarUpa of AtmA is Brahman. The ignorance does not cover the sat and chit aspect of AtmA but they cover only the Brahma-swarUpatA of AtmA. Hence, the mahAvAkyAs give rise to Atma-jnAna which removes ajnAna and consequently adhyAsa and bondage.

Role of Atma-vichAra

We saw that our problem really is that of bondage in the form of desire and fear. In order to remove that, we are interested in spirituality. We understand that bondage is rooted in adhyAsa which means mistaking AtmA and its dharma for anAtmA and its dharma and vice versa. To remove that, one needs to remove ajnAna which will be accomplished by mahAvAkya which has Brahma-Atma-aikya as the vishaya.

However, it is observed that despite hearing MahAvAkyAs a number of times, still the ignorance continues and adhyAsa continues and my bondage continues. This is ascribed to the presence of pratibandhaka. If these pratibandhaka are not present, then MahAvAkyAs result in knowledge which sublimates ignorance. This removal of pratibandhaka is by Atma-vichAra.

This is explained in Sankshepa ShArIraka:

पुरुषापराधमलिनाधिषणा निरवद्यचक्षुरुदयापि यथा ।न फलाय भर्च्छुविषया भवति श्रुतिसम्भवापि तु तथात्मनि धीः।।

पुरुषापराधविगमे तु पुनः प्रतिबन्धकव्युदसनात्सफला। मणिमन्त्रयोरपगमे तु यथा सति पावकाद्भवति धूमलता।।

पुरुषापराधविनिवृत्तिफलः सकलो विचार इति वेदविदः। अनपेक्षतामनुपरुध्य गिरः फलवद्भवेत् प्रकरणं तदतः।।

पुरुषापराधशतसंकुलता विनिवर्तते प्रकरणेन गिरः। स्वयमेव वेदशिरसो वचनादथ बुद्धि रुद्भवति मुक्तिफला।।

What are the pratibandhaka

We understood that in order to remove bondage, we need to remove ignorance, which requires Brahma-Atma-aikya-jnAna. The fructification of Brahma-Atma-aikya-jnAna, despite having arisen, is unable to bear fruit in the form of removal of ignorance and bondage as long as the pratibandhakAs remain. The removal of pratibandhakAs takes place by Atma-vichAra.

Before understanding what is Atma-vichAra, let us understand what are these pratibandhaka. Pratibandhaka is defined as - सति एव पुष्कलकारणे कार्योत्पादविरोधी. These are two-fold, asambhAvanA and viparIta-bhAvanA. These are defined in VivaraNa as under:

तत्र असम्भावनेति चित्तस्य ब्रह्मात्मपरिभावनाप्रचयनिमित्तदेकाग्रवृत्त्ययोग्यतोच्यते। [ब्रह्मण आत्मभावेन परिभावना, तथा तस्याः परिभावनायाः प्रचय: प्रकर्षः तन्निमित्ता या चित्तस्य एकाग्रतया वृत्तिः तत् अयोग्यत्वम् असम्भावना]

विपरीतभावना इति शरीरादि-अध्यास-संस्कार-प्रचयः।

These asambhAvaNA and viparIta-bhAvanA are removed by Atma-vichAra. The following are the constituents of that:

- Manana which is of the form of tarka removes the asambhAvanA with respect to vishaya which is Brahma-Atma-aikya.

- NididhyAsana removes the viparIta-bhAvanA by developing the EkAgratA of chitta-vritti which is capable of determining the sUkshma-artha i.e. Brahm-Atma-aikya.
- Yajna, dAna and tapas for removing pApa.
- Shama-dama-uparati-titIkshA-shraddhA-samAdhAna for removing viparIta-pravritti of chitta.

Thus, we see that manana and nididhyAsana respectively remove asambhAvanA and viparIta-bhAvanA. Here, manana removes prameya-gata-asambhAvanA and shravaNa removes pramANa-gata-asambhAvanA.

Thus, shravaNa, manana and nididhAsana are the constituents of Atma-vichAra.

The constituents of Atma-vichAra

ShravaNa is defined in VichAra SAgara as - श्रवणं नाम युक्त्या षड्विध-तात्पर्य-लिङ्गैः वेदान्तवाक्यानाम् अद्वितीये प्रत्यक्-अभिन्न-ब्रह्मणि तात्पर्य-निर्णय-अनुकूल-चेतोवृत्तिविशेषः।

Manana is defined in VichAra SAgara as - मननं नाम प्रत्यक्-ब्रह्म-ऐक्य-साधक, तद्भेद-बाधक-युक्तिभिः सदा-अद्वितीयब्रह्म-आत्मैक्य-अनुसन्धानम्।

NididhyAsana is defined in VichAra SAgara as - भेदप्रत्यया(अनात्मप्रत्यया)नन्तरित-ब्रह्माकार-प्रत्यय-प्रवाह एव निदिध्यासनम् उच्यते. The culmination of nididhyAsana is in samAdhi. Hence, samAdhi is not separately spoken. [VichAra SAgara 1.24 onwards].

Their respective objectives are also explained as under

ShravaNa - To remove pramANa-gata-asambhAvaNa (doubts). Whether VedAnta explains about non-dual Brahman or something else.

Manana - To remove prameya-gata-asambhAvanA. The AtmA-Brahma-aikya is satya or bheda is satya.

NididhyAsana - “anAtmA is satya. Atma-Brahman-bheda is satya” - this viparIta-bhAvanA is removed.

Here, it is to be noted that manana involves yukti. Yukti is another name of tarka. PanchapAdikA defines tarka as प्रमाण-शक्ति-विषय-तत्सम्भव-परिच्छेदात्मा प्रत्ययः। This is simplified by VivaraNa prameya Sangraha (page 36) as - प्रमाण-तत्-शक्ति-प्रमेयाणां स्वरूपे सम्भव-असम्भव-प्रत्यय:। It basically means a pratyaya i.e. chitta-vritti with respect to the possibility of impossibility of the swarUpa of pramANa, the shakti-of-pramANa and prameya.

ShravaNa, manana and nididhyAsana comprise Atma-vichAra. We have understood their definition and their objectives. We need to understand their swarUpa i.e. their form, so that we can apply it in our daily life.

Forms of Manana

प्रत्यक्-ब्रह्म-ऐक्य-साधक-युक्ति

1. जीवः ब्रह्म, सच्चिदानन्दस्वरूपत्वात्, ईश्वरवत् [anumAna]
2. घटाकाश-मठाकाशयोः उपाधी विना स्वतो भेदो नास्ति, तथा बुद्धि-माया-उपाधी अन्तरा जीव-ब्रह्मणो: भेदो नास्ति. [upamAna]
3. अभेदश्रुतयः [नेह नाना अस्ति किञ्चन, न तु तद्द्वितीयम् अस्ति] जीवब्रह्मणो: ऐक्यं ऋते अनुपपन्नाः. [arthApatti]

प्रत्यक्-ब्रह्म-भेद-बाधक-युक्ति

1. जीव-ब्रह्म-भेदो मिथ्या, उपाध्यधीनत्वात्, घटाकाशमठाकाशयोः भेदवत्. [anumAna]
2. यथा बिम्बप्रतिबिम्बयोः भेदः मिथ्या, तथा जीव-ब्रह्मणो: अपि. [upamAna]

Forms of NididhyAsana

NididhyAsana basically means flow of BrahmAkAra-pratyaya which is devoid of any anAtma-pratyaya. Its culmination is referred to by the word samAdhi. The samAdhi can be savikalpaka or nirvikalpaka. The savikalpaka samAdhi retains dhyAta, dhyAna, dhyeya. This is the usual meaning of the word nididhyAsana. However,

when there is no perception of the triad, then it is called nirvikalpaka-samAdhi. However, nididhyAsana, by definition, retains chitta-vritti. Just that it is not anAtmAkAra, but is BrahmAkAra.

Atma-vichAra in daily life

With this background, let us try to see how to practise Atma-vichAra in daily life.

1. ***Seen is mithyA***

That the seen is mithyA is the hallmark of advaita vedAnta. The ambit of this siddhAnta is tremendous. It takes into account all facets of our daily experience. This needs to be actually lived wherein not only the seen object but their causal connection is also understood to be illusory. This results into equating the waking world with the dream world. We need to constantly remind ourselves - whatever is being seen is like mirage-water. These are illusory. Their seer, which I am, am the only truth. And in me, there is no me-ness. I exist without any tinge of I-ness.

2. ***Seer is constant***

While the seen is illusory on account of being seen, the seer is not a seen. And is hence not illusory. It is rather the substratum of the entire seen. And the vision of this Seer is never lost. Whether it is waking or dream or deep-sleep, it always sees. I am that seer. Even now, while I am engaged in an activity, the ceaseless seer continues to see.

3. ***I and creator of the world are identical in swarUpa***

Depending on the prakriyA, there are differences in approach. In case of mukhya-sAmAnAdhikaraNya, we remove the respective upAdhis namely malina-sattva and shuddha-sattva. In the case of bAdha-sAmAnAdhikaraNya, we completely refute the existence of I to arrive at shuddha-Brahman.

4. ***Practise while not seeing***

There are only two situations. When I am seeing, when I am not seeing. While for the former, Atma-vichAra is essentially situating as the sAkshI, the latter is to situate as the Self without seer-hood.

5. *To see oneself as non-doer and non-enjoyer*

Kartirtva and bhOktritva pertain to anAtmA and are illusory. Therefore, I am neither the kartA nor the bhOktA. In my presence, actions and enjoyments of result take place. I see both of them.

6. *Some useful forms of Atma-vichAra*

- I am chaitanya. I am not any one of the seen. Be it is space, vAyu, agni, prithvi, jala, I am not of these. I am their sAkshI.
- Dharma, adharma, sukha, dukha, ichchhA, dvesha etc all belong to the mind. I am neither the kartA nor the bhOktA.
- “I am not the doer” - this needs to be practised in letter and spirit. I am that in which the entire world is appearing just as it appeared in dream.
- Body is not me. Mind is not me. They appear in me. This entire world appears in me.